

Report

Denali National Park

■ 1.0 Site Description

Denali National Park and Preserve covers more than 6 million acres in south-central Alaska 240 miles north of Anchorage and 125 miles south of Fairbanks on the George Parks Highway and the Alaska Railroad. The primary features of the park are Mount McKinley (see Figure 1), the highest peak on the North American continent, the opportunity to view abundant wildlife in a pristine setting, and vast areas of undisturbed wilderness.

Access to the park interior is provided by a 93-mile road, which is unpaved and restricted to permitted vehicles over most of its length. The park is almost entirely designated wilderness with only the road corridor and scattered sites containing human development.

Figure 1. Mt. McKinley



■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Until 1972, access to Denali was via a circuitous route over unpaved roads. The George Parks Highway between Anchorage and Fairbanks opened in that year. The managers of the park recognized that easier access to Denali would lead to rapid growth in visitation

demand. The ability of the park to accommodate increased visitation by visitors traveling in private vehicles was and still is limited.

The park access road is narrow, unpaved, and has many steep cliffs and other hazards. Responding to the potential problems with traffic congestion, dust and displacement of wildlife from the road corridor caused by increased vehicular traffic, the park closed the road to most visitor traffic in 1972 and instituted a system of shuttle buses to provide visitor access beyond Mile 14.

Many park visitors arrive in tour buses or on the two daily trains operated by the Alaska Railroad (one northbound and one southbound). The trains have regular passenger cars and specialized tour cars provided by the major tour companies operating in the area.

Today, two types of bus service are offered along the park road. The park concessionaire offers tours to Stony Hill overlook at about Mile 60, which offers views of Mt. McKinley in fair weather. Passengers on the tours must remain with the same bus throughout their trip, although rest stops are provided at intervals along the route. Most of the passengers on the tours are members of organized tour groups. The concessionaire also operates a shuttle service along the road. Visitors riding the shuttle buses are free to get off the bus at nearly any location along the road and catch a different shuttle bus to continue their trip. Special shuttles are offered for visitors planning to camp in the wilderness. The tour and shuttle buses are similar, with a seating capacity of 52 people. Buses for campers have fewer seats and more storage area for camping gear and packs. A fleet of _____ buses is used to provide transportation to the park interior and to provide shuttle service to facilities near the park entrance.

Private landowners have developed remote lodging facilities near the end of the road in Kantishna. Visitors to these lodges are transported by buses operated by the lodge owners. The only private vehicle traffic along the road is associated with campers using a campground at Teklanika (Mile 25) and a few professional photographers and researchers who obtain permits.

An estimated 95 percent of all visitors travel on the concession tour buses or the shuttle system. Prices for the tours are set by the concessionaire in response to market conditions. Fares for the shuttles are established each year at a level sufficient to cover the operating costs and provide a fund for replacement of the vehicles.

Table 1. Visitor Transportation System Shuttle Bus Fees for 1999

Turn-Around Point	Polychrome/Toklat River	Eielson	Wonder Lake	Kantishna
	Mile 46/Mile 53 Two Hours 25 Minutes/ Two Hours 50 Minutes	Mile 66 Three Hours 45 Minutes	Mile 85 Five Hours 25 Minutes	Mile 89 Six Hours
One-Way Travel Time				
<i>Shuttle Bus Fares</i>				
Adult Fare (17 and over)	\$12.50	\$21	\$27	\$31
Young Adult (13-16 years)	\$6.25	\$10.50	\$13.50	\$15.50
Youth Fare (12 and under)	Free	Free	Free	Free
<i>Camper Pass Fare</i>				
Adult	\$15.50	\$15.50	\$15.50	\$15.50
Young Adult	\$7.75	\$7.75	\$7.75	\$7.75
Youth	Free	Free	Free	Free
<i>Three-for-Two Pass</i>				
One adult, any three days	\$25	\$42	\$54	\$62
<i>Six Trip "Season" Pass</i>				
One adult, Six trips a minimum of five days apart	\$26	\$26	\$41	\$41
<i>Teklanika Pass</i>				
For people who accessed Teklanika Campground via own car One reserved shuttle seat; then space-available shuttle access for rest of Teklanika stay				
One person	\$21	\$21	\$21	\$21

Note: Fees above do not include National Park Service entrance fees.

Annual visitation in 1998 was more than 372,000. Through the 1980s and early 1990s visitation was growing at a rate that would lead to doubling every seven to eight years.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Denali National Park is committed to maintaining access to the park interior via shuttle and tour buses. The park also is committed to managing the number of vehicle trips, including buses, along the park road to limit impacts to wildlife. The ATS needs at the park include replacing buses as they age and expanding service in a way that meets visitor needs and protects the park's resources.

The park is planning improvements to visitor facilities in the entrance area, including parking areas and improvements to the existing station on the Alaska Railroad.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The primary purposes of the shuttle bus system are to protect the wildlife of the park and to provide a high-quality, wilderness-oriented visitor experience with excellent opportunities to view wildlife in an undisturbed setting. Providing access to the park interior via shuttle and tour buses is one of the most important aspects of the park's approach to meeting visitor needs and protecting the wildlife and scenic resources. The system of bus services has proven to be effective over the 27 years since its implementation.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

BRW, Inc. *Alternative Modes Feasibility Study, Volume II*. Denali National Park and Preserve, 1994.

BRW, Inc. Bill Byrne Memorandum to Maurice Miller and Mike Shields. "Shuttle Bus Evaluation." October 1995.

Denali National Park and Preserve. *Entrance Area and Road Corridor DCP*. February 24, 1997.